

Sex, Lies and Music: Dance Marathons, Reality Shows of the Great Depression

By Paulette Brockington

Is time relative? I don't think so. I'm pretty sure dancers of the endurance races called dance marathons or walkathons didn't think so either. Those dancers were trying to fend off the harsh reality of needing three hot meals and a cot like prisoners get. Their trials and tribulations played out before cheering crowds. Like prize fighters and radio listeners, wagers were made on who could go the distance. Those early "survivor" episodes were the first reality shows. They had the fortitude and were the stuff that led to the first soap operas.

Dancers didn't have to dance well all the way to the end like they do on "So You Think You Can Dance." They just needed to stay upright hoping the music would give them that extra needed push to the 15 minute hourly recess.

Promoters weren't always honest about how the show ran either. You have only to watch "Unreal" for corroboration of the manipulation and coercion that made so many dancers marry, deliver babies, have quickie sex and even die for food and a place to lay their heads. Some promoters promised up to 12 meals a day although the average was 6 or 7.. A stable of dancers even hopped trains from city to city becoming professional marathoners in the process. Promoters liked that. Their fans followed them on radio if not in person for lucrative sponsorships.

Alma Hawkins won the first endurance race danced in 1923 with 7 different partners but lasted 27 hours. Despite their controversial status, during the 1930s dance marathons were entrenched in American culture. Seattle passed an ordinance prohibiting dance marathons within city limits on September 5, 1928. This ordinance was prompted by the attempted suicide of a Seattle woman who had competed in a 19-day marathon held in the Seattle Armory, and placed only fifth. Dance contests today, not marathons, can be brutal too but no one tries to kill themselves over not placing – I hope. Each major promoter had a stable of dancers (known as horses, since they could last the distance) he could count on to carry his event.

Sex had come out of the closet in the 1920s. By the mid-1920s they even had a magazine dedicated to it. Asking readers the same questions then as magazines ask now. Sex was the forbidden delight of many people back then. Back in 1926 and 1927 Sex only cost a quarter and featured both male and female nudes. Entry to a marathon was 25 cents, too. I bring it up because as dance marathons became more popular, they, also, became increasingly controversial. Authorities, pressured by polite society, were concerned about the morality of the events – both the exhibition of female bodies and suggested links between marathons and sexual exploitation were causes for concern, as were corrupt promoters. As the Depression became entrenched and dancers' desperation increased, the marathons also became more dangerous, with contestants succumbing all too often to hallucinatory, called 'squirrely', states in their exhaustion, and even risking death.

Oh, did I mention that Kim K. and Tiny Tim weren't the only ones to cash in by tying the knot. Notoriety particularly when marathons went on for days, weeks or months was key. You gotta have a gimmick to get fans and tips thrown to you on the dance floor. It offered audiences the Depression-era the novelty of feeling superior (and feeling pity) toward someone else.

Earlier I mentioned dancers that moved city to city. Some were vaudevillians. Many competitors developed signature songs or comic routines. Performed through their perennial exhaustion, these numbers induced the audience to shower the performer with coins.

Rest areas were separated by sex for dancers to pass out for 10-11 minutes before being wakened to go back on the floor. "Cot Nights" were popular. Beds from the rest areas were pulled out into public view so the audience could watch the contestants even during their brief private moments. The more a marathon special event allowed the audience to penetrate the contestants' emotional experience, the larger crowd it attracted.

Marathon weddings performed in the arena for a still-shuffling bride and groom. These events (sometimes genuine but usually staged) resulted in gifts for the lucky couple from fans and local businesses.

Mike Ritof and Edith Boudreaux danced for 5,152 hours and 48 minutes from Aug 29, 1930, to April 1, 1931, the longest marathon dance recorded. That amounts to 22 weeks, 3 and 1/2 days.

Today dance competitions use the Cabaret Division as an added attraction. Compare 1931's popular attraction - watching a contestant "frozen alive" in a block of ice, a trick done with four hollowed out ice-blocks put together with a person inside.

At dance events now attendees can't wait for the wee hours of the morning when they can strut their best stuff. Not so much at Depression Era marathons. Intense fatigue brought contestants to a state resembling a coma, with episodes of hallucination, hysteria, delusions of persecution ... acting out daily rituals, talking to an imaginary companion, grinned vacantly, and snatching objects from the air. For the audience watching offered a queasy thrill. Sadism can be sexy.

And if they were lucky the promoter hadn't skipped town by the end of the thon. Several were known for not paying prize money or bills. I know if I was on the dance floor for 1000 hours (41 days) I'd want to shoot someone after enduring people watching me at my most vulnerable even if I did get food. Isn't that like sharecropping. The farmer does the work but landowner reaps the benefits and you end up owning your soul to the company store. The majority went home with whatever was thrown to them on the floor. By the late 1930s regulations and changing mores made the marathon fall out of favor. Faced with a dwindling audience, the onslaught of World War II and the advent of the radio soap opera (1937) audience became aghast with the same drama, romance and danger on the radio. They swore off those 'bunion derbies' like a drunk does liquor. Maybe it is best that today's dance marathons are just charity events.